Recent strikes revive Dr. King's legacy

By Martha Grevatt

What do you give the person who has everything?

Well, if you're an Amazon or Starbucks worker and that person is the CEO, there's only one answer. Give the boss a strike!

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. would have most definitely agreed. To the question asked in the classic labor song, "Which side are you on," his answer would have been, unequivocally, "I'm on the union side." This was demonstrated throughout his activist life, cut short in 1968 when he was only 39 years old.

It is well known that Dr. King was assassinated while in Memphis to support a strike of Black sanitation workers. But much earlier, speaking to the 25th anniversary dinner held by the United Auto Workers union in 1961, he described "ties of kinship between labor and the Negro people." (uawgmtalks.wordpress.com, Dec. 17, 2015)

Dr. King wrote in a 1962 letter to the Amalgamated Laundry Workers union: "As I have said many times, and believe with all my heart, the coalition that can have the greatest impact in the struggle for human dignity here in America is that of the Negro and the forces of labor, because their fortunes are so closely intertwined." (afscme.org)

Dr. King had called for a Poor People's March in the summer of 1968 to link together the struggle against racism with the struggle against poverty and for economic justice for all workers.

There are many moving quotations from King's speeches at union events, leading up to the successful Memphis sanitation strike. If King were alive today he would be supporting the multinational, multigendered, multigenerational workers at Amazon and Starbucks who held strikes late last year during the holidays.

Largest U.S. Amazon strike

Amazon warehouse workers and drivers began their recent historic, coordinated strike at facilities Dec. 19 in four California cities; Atlanta; Chicago; and Queens, New York. At midnight on Dec. 21, they were joined by members of the Amazon Labor Union at the JFK8 warehouse in Staten Island, New York, where the ALU won the first union election at Amazon in the U.S. in April 2022. JFK8 workers maintained a 24-hour picket line even as the temperature dropped to 13°F.

In Queens, Amazon management turned on an outside water tap to flood the strikers during the cold weather. The New York Police Department attempted to confiscate picketers' heaters and surrounded an Amazon driver who stopped his van in solidarity with the strike. The police then physically attacked and broke up the strike line.

Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Memphis, Tenn., March 28, 1968

These determined workers conducted the largest Amazon strike in U.S. labor history. The Teamsters union (IBT), which the ALU joined in June, held over 200 picket lines in solidarity with the strike.

The strike was called to pressure Amazon, which has yet to negotiate a first contract at JFK8, despite the ALU winning a National Labor Relations Board-supervised election 2 ½ years ago.

The strike was also called to demand that the company bargain with drivers employed by subcontractors. An NLRB regional director determined that Amazon is a "joint employer" of the drivers, who drive Amazon vans and wear Amazon uniforms.

Another big strike at Starbucks

On Dec. 20, Starbucks Workers United (SBWU) launched its strike at six stores. Each day of the five-day holiday-week strike more stores were struck, with a total of over 300 stores hit by the final day. In addition, union supporters engaged in solidarity actions at numerous unorganized stores.

SBWU now represents approximately 10,000 Starbucks workers, having won representation elections at around 540 stores since the first union win in Buffalo, New York, in December 2021.

In February, Starbucks agreed to a framework for negotiations with SBWU to achieve a first contract to cover all of the unionized stores. However, around the time that notorious union-buster Brian Niccol took over as CEO in September, Starbucks began stalling negotiations.

Long-time Starbucks worker and SBWU bargaining delegate Michelle Eisen said Starbucks was "backtracking on months and months of progress and promises from the company to work toward an end-of-year framework ratification." (nycclc.org, Dec. 20)

Facing the company's stalling, the union called this Unfair Labor Practice strike, the largest in its history, involving stores in 43 states.

The struggle continues!

The Starbucks strike ended Dec. 24 and the Amazon strike on Dec. 26. Both striking unions expressed solidarity with each other and with the REI ski shop workers, on strike at the SoHo store in New York City since Dec. 4.

These unions are led by class conscious internationalists, as shown by the Palestinian flag displayed during a pre-strike SBWU delegates meeting held Dec. 19.

Since the strikes' conclusion, the unions have yet to make progress at the bargaining table. Struggles for a first contract continue at many other workplaces across the country. The REI ski shop workers have begun their second month on strike.

But these powerful, well-timed strikes sent a message to the Amazon and Starbucks bosses: No contract, no deliveries, no coffee! This was hardly the holiday present Niccol and Amazon CEO Andy Jassy were hoping for.

At this moment the organized labor movement is understandably concerned about who the president-elect will appoint to the NLRB — and expects that it will be someone virulently anti-union. This will make it harder for unions to win favorable rulings from the Board when companies such as Amazon and Starbucks engage in union busting. And Trump has a very cozy relationship with the right-wing Tesla boss, Elon Musk, who despises unions.

But what these militant strikes demonstrated is that the ALU and SBWU will not easily be taken down, regardless of who sits in the White House and how that impacts the composition of the NLRB.

In the spirit of Martin Luther King, three cheers for the Amazon and Starbucks strikers! Victory to these young, fighting unions! ☐

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